EQUIP2
Educational Quality Improvement Program
Policy ▪ Systems ▪ Management

ISSUES BRIEF

The Challenge of Achieving Education For All: Quality Basic Education for Underserved Children

The Question of Access

Since 1990, countries have been working toward providing access to education for all children (EFA). During that period, primary school enrollment rates have increased, and, according to UNESCO's 2002 EFA monitoring report, 50 countries have achieved EFA enrollment goals. However, the report also warns that "almost one-third of the world's population live in countries where achieving the Education for All goals will remain a dream, unless a strong concerted effort is made" (UNESCO 2002).

UNESCO estimates that a large percentage of the 115 million children still out of school live in the poorest and most remote regions of certain countries. This is true of sub-Saharan Africa, where 42 million children are out of school, as well as in Asia and the Pacific, North Africa, and the Middle East. The vast majority of other children who are not being reached by formal education are orphaned, working, affected by HIV/AIDS, or living in countries in crisis or transition.

Few dispute the importance of extending education to children who have no opportunity to go to school. What one can question is whether this can be achieved by relying solely on the expansion of current education management structure and delivery system.

During the 1990s, following the first World Conference on Education For All, there was a concerted focus on what developing countries needed to do to have a realistic shot at achieving universal primary education. However, the analysis focused almost exclusively on mobilizing additional extrabudgetary resources as the means of expanding access. For example, UNESCO estimates that an extra $5.6 billion will be needed annually just to achieve the goals of universal primary education and gender equity by 2015. This would more than double the existing total of international assistance for all education. This may not be a realistic expectation, since aid to education shrank during the sustained economic growth of the 1990s.

Instead, these questions need to be answered: What besides dollars needs to be mobilized? And in what ways do the prevailing approaches to providing quality education need to be supplemented by complementary models?

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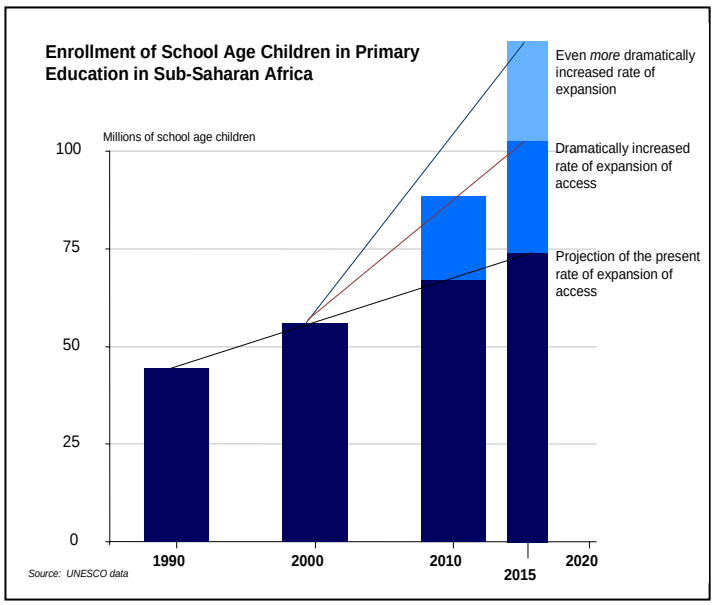
Sub-Saharan Africa illustrates the problems inherent in attempts to reach EFA goals with traditional educational approaches. In 1990, its primary school net enrollment rate (NER) was 54 percent; 44 million primary school-age children had access to school. By 2000, government education systems managed to accommodate another 12 million children. But the NER increased to only 57 percent, because of population growth. As the graph shows, if trends continue to 2010 and 11 million more children are accommodated, the NER would remain at 57 percent. Reaching an NER of 75 percent—still far below the EFA's goal—would require the accommodation of an additional 32 million children and dramatic increases for the capacities of sub-Saharan Africa's education systems. To achieve 100 percent NER in 2015, an additional 73 million children would have to be accommodated. These projections do not even touch on demands on the educational systems relating to quality and learning outcomes.



Conventional education systems and state-managed delivery systems can extend educational opportunity to a large share of children in every country. But serving all children will require extensive overhaul of policies and programs and far more public resources than are likely to be available. The challenge is to develop and scale up complementary models that have demonstrated they can effectively reach chronically underserved populations and regions.

Beyond Access: What Is Being Learned?

In many countries, primary schools experience high repetition and dropout rates, particularly in the first three grades. In the developing world, one-third of children who start school do not complete grade 5. Most dispiriting is the fact that some countries make progress in expanding universal access and attaining EFA target enrollment rates, but high repetition and dropout rates siphon off a large portion of students before they reap any lasting educational benefit. For example, in Uganda and Malawi, which both introduced policies of free and universal primary school access, less than half the children who enter grade 1 progress to grade 6.

Reaching the Underserved

National education systems in developing countries have provided primary education to the great majority of urban children and youth, but they have not been able to provide quality education to historically underserved populations and regions. In the least developed parts of the world, traditionally managed public education systems hold little promise for meeting EFA goals of providing access to quality; eliminating gender-based and other disparities; ensuring completion; and achieving relevant, measurable learning outcomes. Very few countries have seriously modeled what it would take to achieve universal schooling, and even fewer have committed themselves to difficult public policy, restructuring, governance, and mobilization tasks necessary to pursue these objectives.

The poorest people, residents of remote areas, and the most disadvantaged populations—for example, girls and members of ethnic and religious minorities—are those either denied access to schooling or provided with the lowest quality schools by state-funded education systems. It is exactly these people and regions that need to be reached if EFA goals are going to be met. Meeting EFA goals, therefore, is not simply a matter of adequate financial resources, though that is what many national plans assert. Meeting the goals also entails political will and institutional capacity. Public education bureaucracies have not been capable of allowing children in underserved populations to acquire literacy and numeracy skills and the chance to learn material relevant to their lives and communities.

There is reason for hope. As Joe Farrell wrote, "Starting over 20 years ago, and gaining momentum over the past decade, there has been a quiet revolution in schooling in the 'developing' world, which is in many cases radically transforming the 'forms' of formal schooling as we have come to know them" (2001). Complementary models and approaches are demonstrating how to meet the challenge of reaching underserved people and places of the world:

- A well-known complementary model, BRAC in Bangladesh, has graduated 2.5 million children from its rural schools over the past 18 years. A recent evaluation of the quality of education in Bangladesh found that pupil performance in complementary schools— with BRAC as the dominant provider—was consistently superior to government and private schools, in both rural and urban settings (Chowdhury 2001).
- Escuela Nueva in Colombia, with more than 20,000 schools, serves more than half the country's rural areas. Pupil learning outcomes are superior to those in conventional schools. The model has inspired similar schools in at least 10 other Latin American countries. One example is Guatemala's Nueva Escuela Unitaria, with 1,300 schools reaching the indigenous population.
- More than 2,000 community schools in Zambia, many of which target HIV/AIDS orphans, now serve 25,000 children.
- Egypt's community schools, started in 1992 in just four villages in Assiut, have spread to more than 1,000 and serve some 25,000 children.
- Community-organized schools in northern Pakistan now reach 53,000 girls in approximately 2,200 communities. They employ 3,000 young women as teachers.

What these and other promising cases have in common is that they provide alternative means of reaching underserved populations, provide unprecedented levels of access, ensure equity, and produce significant learning outcomes—that is, children who learn to read and write with fluency. These results are attained with unit costs equivalent to—and sometimes less than—the public primary school system.

These approaches have grown out of direct responses to constraints facing efforts to achieve higher rates of access, completion, equity, and performance in formal education systems, including the following:

- Centrally managed systems of teacher development and deployment contribute to shortages of teachers and high pupil-teacher ratios in certain areas of a country.
- Bureaucratic administration results in inadequate supervision and support for schools and ineffective school-community relationships.
- Instructional and other resources are inadequately allocated and distributed to schools.
- Overburdened curriculum and inadequate methods, materials, and supervision lead to little time on task and low levels of learning.

Complementary Approaches in Balochistan, Pakistan, and Northern Region, Ghana

The Balochistan Community Girls School Project and Schools for Life, in Ghana's Northern Region, are just two of many complementary approaches. Operating on impressive scales and in the most challenging circumstances, they contribute to EFA goals of access, equity, completion, and learning. Other examples are summarized in Table 1.

Balochistan: The Challenge

Balochistan, the largest but least populated and developed of Pakistan's four provinces, is the size of France but has a population of only 6.5 million. Settlements are small, scattered, and isolated. Most villages lack paved roads, telephones, or electricity. Within the province's largely nomadic and highly diverse population, many are Pathan and Baloch, and have distinctive linguistic, cultural, and social relationships. However, Urdu is the national language and medium of school instruction.

Parents who want their daughters to go to school prefer them to have female teachers. But in Pakistan there are few educated women available to teach in girls' schools, especially in rural areas. This is caused by the historic lack of educational opportunity for girls as well as the unwillingness of qualified women teachers from urban areas to move to rural ones.

The Balochistan Community Girls' School Project

Begun in 1990, the Balochistan Community Girls' School Project provides full primary school to grade 5 for girls in poor, rural villages. There are now over 2,200 such schools serving more than 53,000 girls, and they have more than doubled their enrolment in less than 10 years. Dropout rates have fallen, completion rates have risen, and the number of graduates going on to middle school increased from 8,236 in 1990 to 22,766 in 1997 (Anzar 1999).

Table 1. Complementary Education Models

Country/Area	Program	Services and Outcomes
Rural Colombia	Escuela Nueva	• 20,000 schools; 1 million pupils • high rates of completion and learning
Bangladesh	BRAC Nonformal Primary Education (NFPE)	• 35,000 schools; 1 million pupils • high rates of completion and learning
Balochistan	Girls' Schools	• 2,200 new schools; 84 percent net enrolment • number of girls going on to junior secondary schools tripled
Ghana	Schools for Life	• within 5 years, spread to 767 communities; 36,000 pupils • 95 percent complete the 9-month program; 80 percent go on to formal schools
Upper Egypt	Community Schools	• serves 200 communities • 70 percent girls; 90 percent completion rate
Ethiopia	Complementary Schooling	• 350 sites; 30,000 pupils • high rates of access, completion, and achievement
Mali	Community Schools	• 1,600 schools; 50,000 pupils • 50 percent completion to grade 6; performance equivalent to government schools
Uganda	COPE	• 60 centers; 5,000 pupils • 3-year program brings pupils to grade 5 equivalency
Malawi	Village-Based Schools	• 33 schools; 11,300 pupils • good retention and learning
Honduras	Educatodos	• 2,800 interactive radio instruction (IRI) centers; 370,000 learners to grade 7 • 75 percent rate of success
Zambia	IRI Learning Centers	• 250 centers; 30,000 using IRI for grades 1–5 • 10 percent dropout rate; learning achievement satisfactory

The Balochistan schools' impressive expansion of access, completion, and learning for rural girls can be attributed to significant departures from the government's traditional approach to organizing primary education. The schools were founded and operated as a collaborative effort with the local community. After a community recruited teachers, established a school, and operated it for three months, the school gained official status and entered into a contract with the Education Department. This allowed the teachers access to training and afforded them full-time government appointments and salaries. The partnership between the Education Department and the local community was initiated and facilitated by a local NGO, which also provided regular support to the school, monitored its operations, and received assistance from a donor-financed, international NGO. Establishing and operating these schools brought about new relationships between government, NGOs, communities, and donors.

The critical factor in the success of these schools was that the government accepted locally recruited young women without full qualifications as teachers. Because they had less education and no preservice training, they received support from a mobile female teacher training program. Experienced women teachers provided regular onsite training and guidance on lesson planning, organization, and instructional materials. Among other factors, the official curriculum was revised to reflect a more balanced gender picture, new texts were developed that promoted teachers' use of child-centered methods, and schools permitted multigrade, activity-based groupings of students.

Northern Region, Ghana: The Challenge

In Ghana's Northern Region, rural areas suffer from an acute teacher shortage. Many schools are not effective, and less than half of the region's children attend school. Settlements tend to be small, sparsely populated, and widely scattered. Also working against efforts to provide education for all are traditional beliefs that formal education alienates children from their culture. Field research indicates that about 40 percent of communities in the Sissala district are without schools. About 39 percent of children in Lawra district in the Upper West Region are out of school, only 5 percent of the population aged 11 and over have ever been to school, and about 78 percent of residents can be classified as illiterate (Casely-Hayford et al. 2003). Contributing factors include

- long distance between schools and children's homes;
- chronic teacher absenteeism and lack of commitment;
- difficulties assigning trained teachers to remote villages; and
- minimal engagement in education by communities and local institutions.

The Schools for Life Program

Schools for Life are organized and managed by a Ghanaian NGO that works closely with communities and the government. The project is financially and technically supported by a Danish NGO consortium. The District Education Office supports the program by assisting with training and supervision. Communities find and nominate resident volunteer facilitators, providing them with some cash, foodstuffs, or labor. Communities also set up five-member committees that manage the school and ensure the facilitator is supported.

Teachers are locally recruited volunteers with some secondary education. They are supported by the community, paid "soap money" of about $5 per month, and receive short induction training and weekly inservice supervision and training. Classes focus on Ghanaian language literacy and numeracy and some general knowledge. School is in session for three hours a day, and manages to cover in only nine months the language and math instructional objectives for grades 1–3.

By 2003, Schools for Life were serving more than 800 communities and about 25 percent of villages in eight districts of Ghana's Northern Region. Between 1995 and 2003, the program enrolled 50,000 pupils; 43 percent were girls. After only nine months of instruction, over 31,000 pupils—62 percent of the total—continued on to grade 3 or 4 in public schools.

Why the Models Work

While Balochistan Community Girls' Schools and Schools for Life reflect government policy for basic education, each demonstrates that inherently more decentralized approaches permit effective schooling to be organized for underserved populations and regions. The approaches rely on local initiatives, management, and decisionmaking, and they make use of a broad array of actors. Relying on a government-managed system—one that waits for personnel, materials, and resources to be allocated and distributed from the center—cannot reach the level of effectiveness and efficiency that is achievable when there is partnership between government, nongovernmental intermediaries, community-based organizations, and other social actors.

Part of what makes these models work is their curricular alternatives: limited, more focused curricula are delivered through child-centered, activity-based approaches that are locally relevant in terms of language and content. Also important is the focus on local management and on-the-ground, ongoing support through partnerships and collaboration with local communities and civil society organizations such as local or international NGOs.

In addition to organizational and curriculum innovations, these complementary approaches identify, recruit, train, and support teachers far differently than the formal system does. In Balochistan, Ghana's Northern Region, and all other cases cited, locally recruited teachers are drawn from an available pool. Little or no prerequisite training is expected. This essentially redefines teachers' roles. They are not seen as experts dispensing knowledge, but as responsible young adults who facilitate children's learning and development. Investments are made to provide them with ongoing support and help, not in preservice credentialing. In many cases, the evidence is that radically less qualified teachers—in terms of formal education and credentials—are highly effective in helping students achieve learning outcomes.

These projects also promise greater cost effectiveness than formal education systems. Data becoming available indicate that complementary models are much less expensive than government-run schools, particularly if output costs are measured. For example, Schools for Life are more than four times as cost effective as government schools in Ghana. Because Schools for Life operate for much shorter days and school years, annual recurrent unit cost data—$31 per pupil in Schools for Life and $39 in government-run schools—are not revelatory. It is that nine months of instruction at Schools for Life produce students who continue their schooling in the third or fourth grade. Over the last six years, 62 percent of them have done so. Government schools take three years to produce a fourth-grader, and, in lower elementary grades, the dropout rate is 50 percent. The cost of schooling a student who has grade 3 or 4 ability is $50 for Schools for Life, compared to $204 for government schools.

Learning from Complementary Approaches

Comprehensive research and comparative analysis of alternative projects, programs, and approaches to providing education are only just beginning. However, it is already clear that several factors are consistently present in successful complementary approaches.
Vision and leadership: Successful programs start with a vision of providing quality and relevant educational opportunity for specific underserved groups—the rural poor, ethnic minorities, girls, urban street children, or orphans—at a cost equivalent to or less than public schools.

Local leadership plays a critical role in introducing community school programs. One or more people or organizations should be well grounded in the practice—if not the theory—of educational reform and social change. Local leadership also must be persuasive, well placed to organize political support and resources, deeply committed to children's learning, and able to withstand disappointment and contrary pressures.

Local design and sensitivity: Successful community school programs grow from the culture and the people they serve. The programs are usually developed, organized, and managed with impoverished, small, and isolated communities without easy access to public schools, and they depend on effective, enduring partnerships between local organizations, communities, government, and development agencies. Such partnerships and adequate local knowledge usually grow out of previous community development work, whether on improved basic health and nutrition, famine and drought relief, or postconflict rehabilitation.

Innovative and effective management partnerships: Successful management relies on innovative partnerships. These can be formal agreements or professional collaborations between NGOs, communities, government, and development agencies. Sustained quality education also depends on combinations of actors who reflect the local context and build or reinforce needed social capital and infrastructure.

Clear definition of roles: Each program's management framework reflects national regulations relating to the establishing and recognizing schools as well as historical experience. Defining roles, responsibilities, and resources requires negotiations between public authorities—ministries of education—and organizations establishing community schools. All parties need to come to an understanding about the roles, responsibilities, and resources each can provide.

Starting small: Successful community schools start with a few committed communities, then often expand to similar nearby communities. The most important resources for this expansion are people who, through field experience, have become local experts, a human resource that must be continually developed.

Managing for quality: In successful community school programs, supervisors and managers are viewed as support staff who are discovering how to enhance teachers' roles and advance children's learning. The radical concept of the organization serving the teacher and learner turns the notion of hierarchical power on its head. Management in support of children's learning is at the heart of effectiveness and quality, along with commitment to a continual process of organizational learning.

Three Fundamental Principles

Three basic principles appear to underlie the demonstrated capacity of complementary models of primary schooling to contribute effectively to the EFA goals of access, equity, completion, and performance:

1. *Government partners with NGOs.* Complementary models are founded on a vitally important shift away from government as the manager of public education and toward a policy and institutional environment that enables government to work in partnership toward education for all with networks of actors (communities, NGOs, and donors). In almost all alternative models reviewed, civil society actors are critical intermediaries between government and local populations and help support their children's education.

2. *The focus is on learning outcomes.* Increased human capacity—the main objective of universal primary education—is formed when children acquire basic reading, writing, and computing skills. By focusing on the outcome of demonstrated learning or proficiency, alternative models of education evince a willingness to do whatever it takes to be successful. They use whoever is available as teachers, create systems of support as needed, and focus the curriculum, calendar, and instruction on children learning. This is a definitive break from the model that defines an education system as the centrally managed delivery of a standard set of inputs whose objective is achieving enrolment targets, rather than learning.

3. *Teachers are locally recruited and trained.* Initial research indicates that a key to the success of complementary models that reach and educate underserved populations is the teachers they enlist and how they develop them. In the traditional model, teachers are experts with a predetermined level of education and certification. They are centrally recruited, hired, and assigned, causing the critical bottleneck in underserved regions unable to meet EFA goals. Alternative models use locally recruited teachers with less education, and make greater investments in a system of regular support and development than in preservice education and training.

In most countries, achieving EFA means reaching regions and populations that are persistently underserved and attaining levels of equity and demonstrable learning that traditional education systems have failed to meet. This means that EFA goals cannot be met through additional financing and expansion of existing systems. It is not enough to hope they will be able to reach places and people they never have.

But alternative models are demonstrating ways to increase access, completion, and learning achievement with precisely the populations who need to be reached. For them, alternative models provide primary education with high levels of quality, relevance, and cost effectiveness.

With appropriate policies and program support, alternative systems may contribute to large-scale progress toward EFA goals. Thus, there is a need to systematically initiate, promote, support, and learn from these approaches. There is also a need to consider the implications for analysis and program design of these alternate approaches, along with their implications for national sector policies and strategies and the international EFA agenda.

Expanding through policy support: Key government and civil society stakeholders need to view complementary programs as catalysts that advance educational sector policies and reform. When community schools demonstrate on a small scale that they effectively provide learning at reasonable cost, ministry and local officials may become advocates for incorporating the approach into sectoral strategies and programs. When developed on a large-scale, alternative models demonstrate how schools can be made more appropriate to their settings and function more effectively. Their expansion also provide lessons about managing at a system level: training and supporting teachers, developing curriculum, negotiating governance and finance mechanisms for large numbers of schools, and creating policy. These lessons hold policy implications for organizing and operating formal governmental systems and, ultimately, may influence a country's ability to realize EFA goals.

Filling a Vacuum

Opportunities for introducing and promoting complementary models are afforded where there are no schools or where educational needs of specific groups—such as girls in Balochistan or AIDS orphans—are unmet. In these cases, alternatives may simply be put on the table as rational program and policy options.

Vacuums present natural starting places for alternative approaches. Community schools in Mali were started in villages so far away from the nearest primary school that most children were unable to attend. The same was true in Upper Egypt, Northern Ghana, Ethiopia, and rural Colombia. HIV/AIDS has created another vacuum: its devastating impact on the teaching corps of some countries requires new pools of potential teachers to be identified and less reliance on individual teachers. Periods of civil unrest and economic and social crisis also create vacuums. In such cases, alternative systems may be able to restore education services and help bring about stability. The EDUCO program in El Salvador illustrates the point. Supported by NGOs, the local initiative organized and operated schools in wartorn areas during the 1980s. Following the cessation of violence, the government used the emergent infrastructure to support schooling in those parts of the country.

Alternative approaches can also be promoted in countries where high levels of wastage, low levels of learning, severe overcrowding, and chronic teacher shortages severely constrain the educational system's capacity to meet EFA goals. Alternative approaches may offer new programmatic and policy options for surmounting such seemingly intractable problems.

Educational System Reform and EFA

In some regions of some countries—such as Sikasso and Koulikoro in Mali—alternative education systems are the mainstream. In Bangladesh, BRAC serves 25 percent of rural villages and 1 million students. Escuela Nueva has 20,000 schools and serves 1 million students in rural Colombia.

Alternative approaches can become the infrastructure through which education is delivered. They are beginning to illuminate a path to education system reform, implicating a drastically different approach to policy, implementation, and resource allocation in the education sector. If more children can be reached through locally initiated schools that are supported through collaboration and partnership with NGOs, it becomes critical to focus on how to expand this system's capacity and funnel resources to NGOs well situated to develop and implement the approaches. This involves moving toward onsite training and supervision of locally recruited teachers, and away from national policies and investments in massive preservice training programs.

Alternative approaches show that motivated young adults, often with scant formal qualifications, can serve—and serve well—as teachers when provided with ongoing professional training and support. This support comes from decentralized systems that rely on local partners and nongovernmental intermediaries, providing effective ongoing services where ministry programs of inservice training and school supervision seldom succeed.

On-the-ground experiences of alternative approaches also

- offer new perspectives on what it takes to open, operate, maintain, and sustain schools, and exhibit different ways to organize, run, and fund them;
- demonstrate that poor communities can start, support, and manage schools, if properly assisted;
- reveal different roles that communities, NGOs, donors, and local and national government agencies can play in schools;
- offer different approaches to teaching and learning, moving away from traditional curricula and pedagogy, and producing better results; and
- demonstrate that poor communities can start, support, and manage schools, if properly assisted.

The success of alternative approaches implies a decidedly innovative approach to EFA, which, from its inception, has been couched in terms of the availability of financial resources. This means that the important questions are not whether donors and developing countries are targeting enough funds to education and whether implementation capacities of education ministries are being reinforced. Instead of asking if the pool of available resources is adequate, the question is whether available resources could be spent differently to achieve better results. Instead of concentrating on building governmental capacity to expand public schools to underserved groups, the focus should be on enlisting and building the capacities of a whole range of civic actors. Partnerships and arrangements with civil society and NGOs need to be seen as critical components of EFA sector initiatives, not the creation of sector investment programs for publicly managed schools.

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